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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Latino families in Carpinteria (California) are building a community among themselves and with the school in support of the students. Parents who are knowledgeable about the school's expectations and the way in which the school operates are better advocates for their children than parents who lack such information. Research has shown that power undergirds the knowledge required by parents to deal with schools and that Latino families care about their children and possess the capacity to be their advocates. When empowerment is viewed as an ongoing, intentional process that is centered in the local community and involves mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, people who lack an equal share of valued resources can gain greater access to and control over those resources. The Carpinteria community study, which involved data collection in 5 schools, describes how the parent-involvement process has been one of shared power between families and schools that led to empowerment of the Latino community. (Contains 71 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Family, School, and Community Relationships

Concha Delgado-Gaitan

Report No. 49

September 1994

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The Center

The mission of the Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students (CDS) is to significantly improve the education of disadvantaged students at each level of schooling through new knowledge and practices produced by thorough scientific study and evaluation. The Center conducts its research in four program areas: The Early and Elementary Education Program, The Middle Grades and High Schools Program, the Language Minority Program, and the School, Family, and Community Connections Program.

The Early and Elementary Education Program

This program is working to develop, evaluate, and disseminate instructional programs capable of bringing disadvantaged students to high levels of achievement, particularly in the fundamental areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. The goal is to expand the range of effective alternatives which schools may use under Chapter 1 and other compensatory education funding and to study issues of direct relevance to federal, state, and local policy on education of disadvantaged students.

The Middle Grades and High Schools Program

This program is conducting research syntheses, survey analyses, and field studies in middle and high schools. The three types of projects move from basic research to useful practice. Syntheses compile and analyze existing knowledge about effective education of disadvantaged students. Survey analyses identify and describe current programs, practices, and trends in middle and high schools, and allow studies of their effects. Field studies are conducted in collaboration with school staffs to develop and evaluate effective programs and practices.

The Language Minority Program

This program represents a collaborative effort. The University of California at Santa Barbara and the University of Texas at El Paso are focusing on the education of Mexican-American students in California and Texas; studies of dropout among children of recent immigrants have been conducted in San Diego and Miami by Johns Hopkins, and evaluations of learning strategies in schools serving Navajo Indians have been conducted by the University of Northern Arizona. The goal of the program is to identify, develop, and evaluate effective programs for disadvantaged Hispanic, American Indian, Southeast Asian, and other language minority children.

The School, Family, and Community Connections Program

This program is focusing on the key connections between schools and families and between schools and communities to build better educational programs for disadvantaged children and youth. Initial work is seeking to provide a research base concerning the most effective ways for schools to interact with and assist parents of disadvantaged students and interact with the community to produce effective community involvement.

Abstract

This study examines how Latino families in Carpinteria, California build community with each other and with the school in support of the students. How parents and schools communicate has been shown to be a strong factor in student academic achievement and social adjustment. Ethnically diverse families living in low socioeconomic conditions often face sustained isolation from the school culture, which can lead to miscommunication between parents and school. When parents do not participate in the schools, children face negative consequences. Parents who are knowledgeable about the school's expectations and the way in which the school operates are better advocates for their children than parents who lack such skills. Under close examination, research has shown that power undergirds the knowledge required on the part of parents to deal with schools and that Latino families do indeed care about their children and possess the capacity to advocate for them. How power is utilized determines the extent to which individuals or organizations access valued resources. When empowerment is viewed as an ongoing, intentional process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources. The Carpinteria community study describes how the parent involvement process has been one of shared power between families and schools that led to empowerment of the Latino community.

Acknowledgments

The five years of research described in this study have produced enormous developments in the area of family-school communications, family literacy, community development, and critical ethnography. The author wishes to thank the leaders and members of the Comite des Padres Latino (COPLA) and its satellite groups, as well as administrators, principals, teachers, and parents in the Carpinteria School District for their participation.

Introduction

This five-year summary of the Carpinteria research describes the home-school linkages constructed by the school and the parents in their effort to relate to one another in support of the students. Justifications are made to make sense of power relations often referred to as "cultural conflict" between the schools and the Spanish-speaking community, which represents over 40% of the total population. When parents do not participate in the schools, children face negative consequences. Barriers are created between children and the teacher as well as between the parents and the school. Cultural adjustment for culturally different students is a complex process, and, in the less successful cases, maladjustment creates obstacles to children's success in school (Trueba, 1989). Thus, it behooves us to examine how Latino families build community with each other and with the school. These insights shed a light on programmatic and policy directions.

How parents and schools communicate has been shown to be a strong factor in student academic achievement and social adjustment. Research reveals the need for parent involvement to promote children's success in school (Bloom, 1985; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Comer, 1984; Dean & Cochran, 1983; Lareau, 1989; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982). The conspicuous absence of ethnically and linguistically diverse parents poses numerous challenges for schools, families and communities (Clark, 1983; Comer, 1984; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Laosa, 1983). Anthropology of education studies have concluded that the culture of the school differs from that of the home for many underclass children (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Goldman & McDermott, 1987; Macias, 1987; Wilcox, 1982).

Sociologists studying issues in education, including Epstein (1986; 1987), Hansen (1988), and Lareau (1989), have pointed out social class differences in the way that parents relate to schools, showing the match of values between middle class families and the schools. Ethnically diverse families living in low socioeconomic conditions often face sustained isolation from the school culture, which can lead to miscommunication between parents and school. Systematic isolation of families and groups from participation in the mainstream culture only leads to resentment, apathy, and eventual alienation of those affected. Schools facilitate the exclusion of students and parents by -- consciously or unconsciously -- establishing activities which require specific majority culturally-based knowledge and behaviors about the school as an institution. Frequently, these ideas are assumed and are not made explicit. The absence of appropriate sociocultural knowledge precludes acceptable participation in formal school activities, resulting in isolation for many parents, especially those who have not been schooled in the U.S. and who are limited in English proficiency.

Where sociocultural congruency exists between home and school settings, children have a greater chance of succeeding in school. Parents who are knowledgeable about the school's expectations and the way in which the school operates are better advocates for their children than parents who lack such skills. Less knowledgeable parents face problems with schools relative to their children's development and school success. Bronfenbrenner notes:

> The developmental potential of a setting is enhanced to the extent that there exist direct and indirect links to power settings through which participants in the original setting can influence allocation of resources and the making of decisions that are responsive to the needs of the developing person and the efforts of those who act in his [and her] behalf.

This research project has maintained that "power" undergirds the knowledge required on the part of parents to deal with schools. This is a marked departure from past deficit model explanations about parent involvement of linguistically and culturally different parents. Deficit perspectives depict inactive parents in the schools as incompetent and unable to help their children because they have a different language, work long hours away from home, belong to different ethnic groups, or are just not interested. However, when examined more closely, research has shown that Latino families do indeed care about their children and possess the capacity to advocate for them. Power is the capacity to produce intended, foreseen and unforeseen effects on others to accomplish results on behalf of oneself (Barr, 1989; Dahl, 1961; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). How one utilizes power determines the extent to which individuals or organizations access valued resources.

The Carpinteria community study describes how the parent involvement process in Carpinteria has been one of a shared power between families and schools that led to empowerment of the Latino community. The empowerment process in the community dealing with educational issues described here is grounded in research and theory addressing the following social, cultural, and political assumptions (see Allen, Barr, Cochran, Dean, & Greene, 1989; Barr, 1989; Bernstein, 1982; Bourdieu, 1977; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Comer, 1980; Dreeben, 1968; Freire, 1973; Lareau, 1989; Ogbu, 1978; Trueba, 1989).

Many definitions characterize the notion of empowerment. The most common is related to self-esteem -- the idea that empowerment means that people feel good about themselves. Another concept of empowerment is the notion that it is something that someone can bestow on someone else -- someone with more power is in a position to enable someone with less power. My conceptualization of empowerment is that it is an ongoing, intentional process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources. People become aware of their social conditions and their strengths; they determine their choices and goals. Action is taken to unveil one's potential as a step to act on one's own behalf. Implicit here is consciousness of and responsibility for one's behavior and willingness to take action to shape it as desired through a social process. This composite definition includes ideas expressed in works by Allen, Barr, Cochran, Dean & Greene, 1989; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; and Freire, 1973.

Theoretically, six major features comprise the empowerment process:

1. Underrepresented groups (including women and ethnically and linguistically different people) are assigned unequal status in society.

2. All individuals have strengths.

3. A truly democratic society is organized to provide all people of diverse backgrounds choices and opportunities to exercise their strengths.

4. An understanding of the history of a given community or group, including the language, values, and traditions associated with role allocations, is indispensable to determine appropriate strategies for reducing inequality.

5. Learning new roles provides people with access to resources, and the learning of these roles occurs through participation in new settings.

6. Collective critical reflection is an integral process in participation and empowerment to bring concerns to a conscious level.

Methods and Setting

Ethnographic Research Methods

In the Carpinteria study, school parent involvement activities were observed, as were various contexts of interaction in the home and school settings. These included conventional activities like parent-teacher conferences and meetings of school-site councils, as well as less conventional activities such as the Bilingual Preschool Parent Involvement Program. Interviews were conducted with parents in each of the settings observed and with parents who had been invited to the various meetings but did not attend. Interviews were also conducted with teachers and administrators in elementary schools who worked with Mexican American Spanish-speaking children and their parents. All interviews were recorded and transcriptions made. In addition, a total of one hundred fifty-seven activities that involved parents and teachers were observed. The activities constituted the major unit of analysis over a five-year period.

Carpinteria: The Research Setting

Carpinteria, California is a community which lies about twenty-five miles south of Santa Barbara. Before the late 1950s and early 1960s, the community was ethnically segregated and one of the schools was designated as the Mexican school. The gradual social and economic movement upward of many Mexican American families has been evident over the years as families who lived in little shacks in the old part of town in the forties moved across the freeway to the newer section. Sometimes more than one family shares a house. Although many Mexican American families have improved their socioeconomic conditions, informants believed that issues like childcare, housing for low-income people, education to discourage students from dropping out, and medical services for low-income families remain challenges for the entire community to solve.

Of the nearly 12,000 residents, whites represent 67%, Mexican Americans 31%, Asians 1%, African Americans .5%, and others, including Native Americans, .5% (U.S. Census, 1981). The Latino population is comprised mostly of Mexican Americans whose presence in California ranges from the time of Mexican rule (early 18th century) to recent immigrants from Mexico. There also appears to be an increasing number of immigrants from Central and South America. This Latino population consists of three language groups: English-only speakers, bilingual speakers and limited-English speakers. The majority of this group (70%) is English-speaking and has lived in the community for three or more generations. Although the census refers to this population as "Hispanic," the participants identify themselves as "Mexican," "Mexican American," and/or "Latino." The majority of the immigrant Mexicans live in the western part of town where there are many low income rentals. Soaring rents in the area have created a devastating financial burden for most renters in Carpinteria but are especially difficult for the working class Latino families, whose incomes are less than the Anglos. For example, the family yearly mean income was between $1,000-$6,000 higher for the Anglo family than for the Mexican family.

Mexican Workers in Carpinteria. Census data about Carpinteria reveal that the Mexican population is overrepresented in the fields of farming, fishing and the resort industry, like restaurant and hotel employment, as compared to their Anglo counterparts. For example, the total employed Anglo group over 16 years of age was 4,257 compared with 1,668 Mexican persons. Of that employed group, almost 30% of the Anglo group were managers or professionals while less than 5% of the Mexican group occupied comparable positions. Agriculture, fishing, an aluminum factory, small private businesses, and the public school district comprise the primary places of employment for Carpinteria residents. Some people, however, work out of town in Santa

Barbara or Ventura. Although employment is variable for working class Mexican people due to the non-permanent nature of the work, agriculture provides the most available employment for many. This is not field-work, it is primarily at small independent ranches and in local nurseries that produce orchids.

Approximately 48% of the bilingual and Spanish-only sector are employed in service jobs or as laborers. They are largely the immigrant Mexican group. Another statistic indicates that some Mexican people (8%) have become professionals and are employed in education in the Carpinteria School District or in small businesses.

Schooling in Carpinteria. The Carpinteria School District serves a total of just over 2,000 students. Of this enrollment, approximately 35% are Hispanic, and, of that percentage, the limited English-speaking students comprise 40%. The ethnic makeup of the central district administration is Anglo, except for one Mexican American male who coordinates the Migrant Program and one Mexican American principal.

The Carpinteria school district has six schools: four elementary, one middle, and one high school. One of the elementary schools is actually in Creekside, a community adjacent to Carpinteria. The elementary schools are divided by grades as follows: Canalino School has preschool-grade 2, and Aliso, Main, and Summerland have grades 3-6, the latter serving primarily students in the Summerland community.

All the schools in Carpinteria receive state and Federal funds, requiring the development of a yearly school plan. This school-site plan guides programs which the school executes during the year. Principals must develop programs in accordance with the regulations of special funds that supplement the school district's fiscal allocations for instruction and other programs.

The process of obtaining input to develop the school plan varies between schools. Essentially, school principals obtain input from parents, teachers, and specialists to write various components of the plan. They call community meetings or survey different sectors to assess needs and opinions on reading, language arts, and math curriculum as well as teacher education, bilingual education, and parent education.

Each school deals with specific requirements from the following State and Federal program funds: Chapter 1, Economic Impact Aid (EIA), State Preschool, School Improvement Program, Special Education, and Migrant Education. The planning and coordinating of specific requirements for expenditure of these funds with the programmatic needs that treat students' identified educational problems constitute a large part of the principals' responsibility. They solicit assistance through input from teachers and parents to the extent that they help determine the curriculum utilized in the classroom and events that require expenditures from state and Federal funds.

In spite of the fact that the school district had instituted a bilingual program, the schools had problems involving Latino parents in school meetings. The concern on the part of the school district about the lack of participation of Latino parents in the schools stemmed from the fact that 40% of the student population is working-class Latino, and, of that percentage, the majority of their parents are Spanish-speaking.

As an ethnographer interested in family and community literacy, I studied literacy activities in the family and in the classrooms. After collecting over thirty case studies, I met with large groups of Spanish-speaking parents from the same community to get feedback to verify, confirm, clarify, or modify what I had learned in the community. These Latino parents formed an organization which came to be known as the Comite de Padres Latinos (COPLA).

The Emergence of COPLA

In large community meetings, Spanish-speaking parents discussed issues of parental responsibilities in their children's education, including literacy and other aspects of schooling. They recognized that many parents did not understand how to assist their children with their schooling because they did not know how to communicate with teachers. Consequently, their children often did not benefit from teaching and special resources that could help them succeed in school. During the process of reflecting on what I had learned from families in the case studies, parents recognized that some had more experience than others in how to deal with the school.

A man who had regularly attended the parent meetings suggested that those who were more experienced should organize and support those who were not as knowledgeable. They solicited my assistance as a resource with a great deal of data about their families, the schools, and access to the community at large, all of which they wanted to learn. I facilitated the meetings of the group of Latino parents who, together with school personnel, worked to improve the educational programs for Latino students in the school district.

Initially, I did not intend to participate actively with COPLA; however, I became enticed by the developments in the field. Little did I know that it would edify my life in significant ways. I have learned things that I will carry with me, not only into future studies, but also into my personal life.

My work with Latino families reaffirmed my appreciation for patience, respect, and collectivity as virtues. The qualities displayed by the people with the collaborators in the field demonstrated a strength indicative of their cultural beliefs about respect for others, family networks, and love for their children.

Parents met regularly, and their group increased in size each time they met. At the beginning, the parents met weekly, each time discussing their experiences of being Mexican in Carpinteria and the difficulty of participating in the schools when they did not have knowledge about their rights and responsibilities. They talked about their successes and failures when dealing with their families and schools. Initial group discussions focused on their feelings of fear, confusion, despair, frustration, and isolation in not knowing what was expected of them, and whether they were doing it right. They quickly recognized that they could not continue just sharing complaints about their feelings. They confronted and dispelled beliefs about themselves that had prevented them from becoming more visible in the schools, including the fact that they spoke a language different from that of the school; they did not have extensive formal schooling, and, therefore, could not help their children; and they have a reputation for being unmotivated. Parents focused on a vision to work together and open up more opportunities for their children's education. Through critical reflection they learned that they had choices.

From the onset, the focus of the organization has always been their children's welfare. Parents reached out to other Latino families in the district to support each other as they learned to be advocates for their children. A second major goal was to work cooperatively with school personnel to resolve issues pertaining to children, both in and out of school.

COPLA: Developmental Phases of Influence

Research findings of the role of COPLA in family-school connectedness between Latino families and schools will be presented in three phases. The phases represent a historical development of the data over a five-year period.

Phase I: Initial Successes. During this period COPLA began a dialogue that has distinguished it as an organization -- a dialogue that reflects the

respect between the members and their dedication and commitment to children.

Part of this dialogue, between COPLA and school district personnel, has influenced the way in which parents and schools relate to one another. We saw advancements in the frequency with which Latino parents and school personnel interacted through personal contact, written communication, and specific training for Latino parents. We also saw other changes in educational programs which involved Latino students, principally in Canalino and Aliso schools.

Latino Spanish-speaking parents began to attend more meetings in the schools and became active in issues that directly affected their children. Some parents began to assist at large meetings while others developed more trust and began to initiate more personal contact with their children's teachers.

Teachers and principals reported more communication between teachers and parents. Parents reported more communication between them and teachers, so that they better understood what teachers expected of their children. This has been at the heart of COPLA's success.

During Phase I, the Carpinteria School District accepted more bilingual students into the Gifted and Talented Education Program (GATE) after lengthy discussions between program leaders, principals, and parents who believed that their children should be in GATE classes because they met the cognitive criteria, even if they were bilingual.

COPLA began to organize a group in each school. The satellite groups in every school were clearly in place, but had the most visibility in two elementary schools, Canalino and Aliso. Progress was slower in Main School as well as in the Carpinteria Middle and High School. Some Latino parents who were not active in COPLA criticized those who were because they believed them to be "busy bodies" with nothing else to do. This confirmed the need for organizations like COPLA to assist Latino parents to become more knowledgeable about their role as advocates for their children. The irony, of course, is that the children of critics still benefited from the initial efforts of COPLA.

Phase II: Structural Changes in the COPLA Organization. During this period of the development of the COPLA organization, the nature of the dialogue between COPLA and the schools characterized its success as an advocate organization. The way in which parents interacted with each other and school personnel identified COPLA as a viable community leadership group. During this period, COPLA extended its sphere of influence and developed formal regulations as an organization. Various community groups from around the Santa Barbara area learned about COPLA and its successes with building communication between the Latino community and the schools and called upon members of the organization to meet with them to help organize parents in their respective communities.

As satellite COPLA groups became stronger in each of the schools, they took on particular forms of operating given the specific educational needs of the children in the respective grade levels. The organization extended its reach by joining forces with other community groups that also advocated for Latino families and education of Latino students. Among these organizations was the Latino for Better Government group which is comprised of professional Latinos in Carpinteria. One focus of this group is on the hiring of Latino personnel (especially teachers and administrators) in the school district. Through their joint efforts with other organizations during this phase of its development, COPLA became recognized as an important voice in the schools, when there is hiring of personnel, COPLA members are involved as representatives of the Latino community. This is a new development in recognizing the importance of the Latino community voice in hiring school personnel.

Phase III: New Efforts of Cooperation and Growth. During this period of development,

COPLA continues to negotiate with the schools and bring about improvements in the educational programs, including the hiring of Spanish-speaking personnel. The middle school has hired a Spanish-speaking secretary for the front office. After five years of COPLA expressing concern in this area, the middle school has recognized its importance.

With the hiring of a new superintendent, Pedro Garcia, the school district central administration has made new commitments to work with the Latino community as well as with other parent groups. As part of this new commitment to parent involvement, the district administration hired a consultant to train COPLA leaders on child development and finding strengths of the family. The leaders who have trained with the consultant have begun to organize other parents to extend their training. The second tier of trainees will then select a third cohort to train.

New problems have emerged in COPLA. Meetings for Latino parents have decreased in attendance at the local schools. Analyses of this issue among COPLA leaders as well as school personnel recognize two possibilities: (1) the focus of parent involvement has changed from awareness to actual practice; many parents have become more active in their children's schooling and have learned how to participate directly at the level of parent-teacher communication which explains the decline in parent meeting attendance; (2) COPLA leadership may be failing to educate new families in the community as their children begin school, as the organization has focused much of its attention on expanding and linking with other community organizations and has neglected to put in place an organizational commitment to incorporate new families in the schools.

The most significant finding throughout these three phases of parent involvement development in Carpinteria is that Latino parents explicitly state that the success of COPLA is based on their learned culture and ability to be supportive advocates of their children through school. It is that knowledge which they want to share with other parents.

Developments in School Outreach to Community

Our discussion of COPLA focused on the ways in which Latino families have learned the school culture. We now present a synopsis of the preliminary analysis of data collected in five schools in Carpinteria in 1993 about the efforts of the schools to involve home culture in the curriculum of Latino families and establish closer communication with the parents.

The most significant findings deal with the central district administration's proposals to support principals, and indirectly teachers, to make parent involvement a priority in the daily curriculum. Essentially, the superintendent has designed a policy that holds principals accountable for their outreach with parents. The superintendent has established a measure of evaluating principals on an on-going basis that holds them accountable for activities that facilitate parents to communicate more effectively with the schools.

The impact of this new policy development is evidenced in the new practices of bilingual teachers where parents are concerned. In Canalino School (preschool-grade 2), teachers have begun to hold monthly meetings with parents of all children to present the monthly classroom curriculum and to solicit their support. This exchange has possibilities for incorporating the family culture because teachers listen to parents' concerns about supporting the school's curriculum in the home. Teachers have to make

accommodations in their classroom interactions that better assist students in comprehending instruction. They become more sensitive to the difficulties and tensions in the home and help the student adjust.

In Aliso (grades 3-6), a new principal is getting acquainted with Latino parents, but bilingual teachers are not conducting any collaborative efforts to reach out to parents. This constitutes a different turn for this school since, in the past, Aliso has been a leader in efforts dealing with Latino parents. A major issue being raised by teachers in Aliso is that Latino parents should join the English-speaking parents in meetings so that they do not duplicate efforts. Latino parents, however, have said that obviously teachers need to better understand the specific needs of Latino parents.

In Main (grades 3-6), a new Latino principal has been hired, and he has hired a few new teachers. New efforts include a bilingual newsletter, open meetings, and availability of the principal and teachers for meetings with parents.

The middle school has hired a new counselor who advises Spanish-speaking children. Also, one new bilingual teacher has begun to establish more communication with the parents of Spanish-speaking students. This is the first effort on the part of the school to meet the learning needs of Spanish-speaking students who have been tracked in low-level classes because they did not know English well enough to be in advanced classes, even if they were intellectually equal to English-speaking students.

In the high school, the Latino vice-principal has more contact with students about their academic programs and has direct contact with parents to deal with academic concerns.

In summary, the 1993 data show that teachers need a great deal of support to change their structural constraints, and enable them to establish effective communication with Latino parents and incorporate the culture of the home in the school. Except for Canalino School and isolated efforts in other schools, teachers do not systematically include the culture of the home in their daily instructional curriculum except for the use of the Spanish language in bilingual classes. Further research will help us understand what institutional support is required to help teachers and the school better understand the needs of Latino children, develop a culturally sensitive classroom curriculum, and make the family and school a stronger unit for children in the Carpinteria community.

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